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SUBJECT: EMBASSY DUSHANBE REACHES OUT TO RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES IN THE FERGHANA VALLEY

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: EmbOffs and William Trigg, USAID's Regional Society and State Advisor based in Bishkek, travelled to the Ferghana Valley in Northern Tajikistan to conduct outreach events with young people and members of the religious community.

EmbOffs met students at a madrassa and worshippers at a Friday praying mosque in the remote Asht district; spoke to members of the religious community in Isfara; and gave presentations to students at the American Corner in Khujand. EmbOffs were enthusiastically received at each venue, and we can see the enormously positive impact that a robust public diplomacy strategy can have in this country. End summary.

ISFARA TO KHUJAND

¶2. (SBU) We started off by calling on Domullo Safokhon, the imam khatib of the Central Mosque in Isfara, and his deputy, Hoji Homidullo Karimov. Isfara is often described as the most religious part of Tajikistan, and both Safokhon and Karimov spoke to us frankly about issues affecting their work (reftel). Safokhon and Karimov work closely with the imams in the district's Friday praying mosques, proactively arranging meetings between imams and secular government officials to discuss issues of mutual interest. We had expected that the imams would be somewhat reluctant to speak at length with us, given the sensitivity of religious issues; we even doubted that they would show up for our meeting. We were surprised at how open our discussion was, however. The Central Mosque provides after-school religious instruction in Isfara, and Karimov said he would be happy to work with us in reaching out to young people.

¶3. (SBU) Our next stop was the American Corner in Khujand, where we gave presentations on Muslim life in America and on Barack Obama. We were met by a crowd that was bigger than we had previously seen at that American Corner; the room was packed with about 50 students, mostly from Khujand State University. The students were amazed to find out that there are about as many Muslims in the United States as there are people in Tajikistan. They were even more amazed to find out that members of different Islamic sects - Sunni and Shia, for example - even prayed at the same mosque. The students had many questions about the new administration, and it was obvious that they had a positive impression of President Obama. After the session, the students mobbed us and asked us even more questions about life in the United States.

¶4. (U) The next day, we drove to the remote Asht district, which borders Uzbekistan and has a population of about 180,000. This was the first trip that an EmbOff had made to Asht in about ten years. There are many Uzbek villages throughout the district, and many Tajiks also speak Uzbek. One resident of Shaydon, a town in the center of the district, told us that the only work that people could find was in Russia. He also said that he had not had electricity since January 14.

¶5. (SBU) Our first meeting was with Mullo Sadullo, the director of a madrassa near Shaydon. Tajikistan has 19 madrassas, and 9 of them are in Sughd Province. Sadullo told us that all of the madrassas report to the Council of Ulamo, the government-affiliated religious council. The Council approves the madrassas' curricula, and the Council's regional representatives monitor the examination process. The curriculum in the madrassas throughout the country should essentially be the same, with only a few minor variations.

¶6. (SBU) There are 59 students at Sadrullo's madrassa - 40 men and 19 women. The madrassa does not take the place of secular education; students range in age from 16 to 22 and must first complete compulsory secondary school. The normal course of study lasts 4 years and encompasses 25 subjects, 10 of which are secular. Women generally stay about two years, then leave to get married. Students receive a diploma, and then can go on to an institution of higher education. Sadrullo said his goal was

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not to prepare imams, but rather to give students a firm religious base. Of the madrassa's 162 graduates since 1999, only 8 have become imams.

¶7. (SBU) Sadrullo arranged for us to speak separately with the men and women students. The men were fascinated by Trigg's descriptions of religious life in the United States - that there were prayer rooms in public buildings, and that women can freely wear hijabs in school. The majority of their questions involved personal conduct and appearance ("can Americans get a passport if they have a beard?"). The women were less vocal with us, and about half of them looked at the floor while we were in the room; one woman asked us whether women and girls can wear hijabs in schools in the United States.

#### AMERICAN PERFORMS A MIRACLE

¶8. (SBU) We finished off our trip to Asht by visiting a Friday praying mosque in the village of Sahrob. The mosque had just been completed in 2008 (funded from Saudi Arabia, reportedly), and there were about 1000 to 1500 men - mainly in their 20s and 30s. Oddly, the imam-khatib of the Central Mosque in Shaidon was also there, which made us wonder who was leading the prayers at the Central Mosque. Nevertheless, he handed the mosque's imam the prepared sermon that had been faxed from Dushanbe. We were surrounded by curious onlookers; we were clearly the center of attention.

¶9. (SBU) Trigg and PolAssistant went into the mosque to pray.

The imam invited Trigg to address the worshippers, and Trigg accepted - speaking in both Uzbek and in English. After Trigg finished, the imam declared, "Could you ever imagine that an American would come and pray at our mosque? It is a miracle."

¶110. (SBU) Comment: The events and meetings that we attended confirm that the demand for information about Americans and the United States in Northern Tajikistan is enormous. The more we engage, the better we look, and there are enormous opportunities. Our interaction with Mullo Sadullo was interesting, but it appeared to us as though the authorities view the madrassas as yet another instrument to control religious communities. End comment.

JACOBSON